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VETERANS' REGIONAL NATIONAL CEMETERY AT FORT MITCHELL, AL

MF 1107
ORIGINAL

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

NINETY-NINTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

OCTOBER 25, 1985

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Ser. No. 99-38

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
57-312 O WASHINGTON : 1986

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VETERANS' REGIONAL NATIONAL CEMETERY AT FORT MITCHELL, AL

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25, 1985

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Phenix City, AL.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 9:35 a.m., in the Russell County Courthouse, 14th Street, Phenix City, AL, Hon. Richard Shelby (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representative Richard Shelby.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN SHELBY

Mr. SHELBY. I am going to call the subcommittee hearing to order. We will try to move along on this beautiful Friday morning.

The National Cemetery System traces its legal origins to the act of July 17, 1862, which authorized President Lincoln to purchase cemetery grounds for the interment of soldiers dying in service of their country. This country has therefore recognized its moral obligation to caring for those who have honorably served in our military forces since that time.

In compliance with the provisions contained in Public Law 93-43, the 93d Congress, which established the National Cemetery System as we know it today, the Veterans' Administration has achieved its objective of providing one large national cemetery for each of the ten standard Federal regions and one for the Washington, D.C. area. The last regional cemetery to be established under this concept is the one planned for Fort Mitchell, AL.

This morning we are meeting to discuss the status of Fort Mitchell. It is through our national cemeteries more than anything else that the Federal Government pays tribute not only to our war dead but to all of those who have served in the military service.

Interments in national cemeteries have generally increased each year since establishment, and during the next 15 years, as the peak period of demand is approached, veterans' deaths in the Nation will continue to increase annually.

The projected peak period is estimated at between the years 2000 and the year 2015, at which time the age 65 and over veteran group will increase from its present level of about 4 million to about 9 million people. Therefore, the establishment of the Fort Mitchell National Cemetery which will serve seven States, I believe, is most timely.

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We will be hearing from VA officials regarding their proposed plans for the cemetery. We will also be hearing from many of the individuals who supported the establishment of this cemetery in Alabama rather than in Georgia. It was a tough fight, and you can all be proud of your efforts toward achieving this goal.

In particular, I want to commend Mrs. Lenora Smith, who is the widow of our friend, the late State Senator Joe Smith, who faithfully served in the Alabama Senate for many years. Lenora first brought the Fort Mitchell property to our attention suggesting that it might be utilized as a veterans' cemetery. She deserves much credit for her perserverance and her interest in the development of this historical piece of property here in Russell County.

I want to say in the outset that your Congressman Bill Nichols, my colleague, told me to impart to you today that he had a prior standing commitment, otherwise, he would certainly be here in Russell County today, because he was instrumental, as you know, in pushing this legislation to where it is today.

Our first witness today will be Mr. Dean W. Holt, executive assistant, Department of Memorial Affairs, Veterans' Administration. He will be accompanied by Mr. Michael Watson. Gentlemen, if you will all just come on up to the table.

Your written testimony, Mr. Holt, will be submitted as part of the record in its entirety and made a part thereof without objection. You may sum your statement any way you decide.

I want to thank you for coming and we appreciate you being here. I know the veterans' groups here in Alabama and the people here in Russell County appreciate your appearance here today.

STATEMENT OF DEAN W. HOLT, EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT, DEPARTMENT OF MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, VETERANS' ADMINISTRATION, AND MICHAEL WATSON

Mr. HOLT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good morning, sir.

On behalf of the Department of Memorial Affairs, the Veterans' Administration, and our Acting Chief Memorial Affairs Director, I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and this group today to provide you with an update on the Fort Mitchell National Cemetery.

Fort Mitchell will serve as the cemetery for Standard Federal Region IV, which is comprised of the eight southeastern States of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

It is the last of the regional cemeteries to be built, and will complete the regional concept adopted in the mid-1970's as a means of distributing national cemetery grave space on a more equitable geographic basis throughout the United States.

The Fort Mitchell National Cemetery will have grave space to meet the burial needs of veterans of this area for many years to come, in fact, it will last well beyond our long-range planning year of 2030.

As you are aware, we did not get started on the regional cemetery for Standard Region IV as we had planned. Another site was originally selected. It was found more costly to develop and the decision was made in 1981 to build the cemetery at Fort Mitchell.

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There were some complications in getting the land transferred to the VA, but I am pleased to say that everything is on track now, and that I am going to be able to give you a very good report on the status of this cemetery.

Mr. SHELBY. I know that the people here in the room want to hear this. Go ahead.

Mr. HOLT. Fort Mitchell has a rich cultural heritage which we believe will blend well with the historic and patriotic values associated with a national cemetery.

The site was deeded by the State of Alabama to the VA in December of 1983. It consists of 279 acres of land in east Russell County, about 10 miles south of the Phenix City, AL, metropolitan area. Access to the site is from State Highway 165 and the property consists of and is dominated by oak, hickory and pine forest.

This area was originally inhabited by native Americans of the Muscogee or Creek Nation. Historic Fort Mitchell was an early frontier military post located immediately adjacent to our property. A small family cemetery dating from the 1830's already exists on this property, where several military officers are buried.

Also, there are foundations of a mid-19th century plantation, the Cantey Plantation. We are proud to be adding to the rich history of the Fort Mitchell area, and are planning future construction carefully so that important archeological features will be preserved.

Construction for the first phase development is funded, fully funded at $4,038,000. That includes $300,000 for the master plan and $3,748,000 for phase I construction. The phase I construction project calls for development of approximately 60 acres of land, an entrance gate and drive, a loop road, administration and service buildings, two committal shelters, a flagpole assembly area, and development of approximately 10,000 grave sites.

Based on our current projections, the first phase will provide for interments through the year 1995. Future projects will be scheduled to develop additional gravesites as they are needed.

Our schedule and our milestones for developing this cemetery are: the master plan was completed in December 1984; contract documents were completed in September 1985. We will advertise, review and accept bids by the end of November 1985. In fact, I was told yesterday that we are ready to go on the street in about a week with the invitation for bids. We will start construction in January 1986; complete construction in April of 1987 and dedication will hopefully be in May 1987.

We will begin operations about June. We anticipate the dedication will be in late May, so we will start interments shortly thereafter.

Let me emphasize that the milestone dates are estimates and are subject to change, but we hope this will give you a general overview of the process and a reasonable approximation of how long it will take.

Mr. Chairman, I understand that you recently visited Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver, CO. That cemetery was originally established in the 19th century, and represents a concept in cemetery design which is far less responsive to the environment than the approach we use today. You saw wide open spaces out there. At Fort Mitchell, you are not going to see that.

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Fort Mitchell will be located in a rural setting with beautiful natural vegetation and a preservation of its important cultural heritage. Our goal is to provide a serene and esthetically pleasing facility which will relate to the long-term needs of the environment and preserve the sense of history which pervades this truly unique location.

With us today is Mr. Mike Watson, of Watson, Watson and Rutland, who represents the Alabama joint venture firm which was selected to prepare the master plan for the overall development of this cemetery. With your permission, sir, he will give you a more detailed and pictorial view of the Fort Mitchell National Cemetery.

That concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. I will be glad to answer any questions either now or after Mr. Watson finishes his presentation.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Holt appears on p. 25.]

Mr. SHELBY. We appreciate your testimony. We will go on to Mr. Watson. We appreciate your being here. Maybe you can help us better understand the status of the Fort Mitchell National Cemetery. I think it will help us all.

Mr. HOLT. Thank you, sir.

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL WATSON

Mr. WATSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentleman.

It is my pleasure to be with you today to represent our joint venture team. I am just the architectural component. Also on our team for the planning group are Laubmann-Reed, and Goodwyn and Mills of Montgomery.

We have been in the process of master planning and producing construction documents, on this project for well over 3 years now. If I may at this point express our sincere appreciation to the Veterans' Administration for their cooperation and their leadership throughout the project.

What I would like to do, if I could today, is not bore you with the specifics but give you a broad overview of our project and some of the planning process that went into the final determination of phase I.

[Slide presentation.]

As we enter into the project of the slide show here, you note the 1834 map of the original U.S. military post at Fort Mitchell. One of our main concerns from the outset was to insure that we were very cognizant of the history behind the piece of property. Since 1813 it has been vitally involved in every stage of the development of our region.

[Slide.]

As you note from the aerial photograph, the property as indicated is bounded on the west by State Highway 165. A small portion is excluded from that as you see the triangular piece. The southern portion and eastern portion are bounded by the Southern Railroad. Also, to the right of your slide or to the east about a mile is the Chattahoochee River. The portion that is excluded, the south portion, is the actual Fort Mitchell site.

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It was determined that this was far too historically and archeologically significant to make a stab at a total site plan or land development plan on this portion, so it was excluded.

For the first 3 or 4 months the team was involved in analyzing the site, taking a look at its physical and historical attributes, everything that affects the site to be used.

[Slide.]

Here are a few of the site diagrams that were prepared. This one deals with the surface hydrology, terrain topography, and surface drainage. All these things were deposited at the end into a total plan which indicated the portion it was most desirable to build on.

[Slide.]

Here is an inventory of the native vegetation, and the area where it falls. Your hard stands of pine, oak, grassy areas, open areas.

[Slide.]

Soil borings to determine the composition of the soil were taken throughout the site. Identification was made of the most historical areas including the Cantey Plantation, some early Indian settlements, gravesites and of course, the Fort Mitchell site.

[Slide.]

From some of these plans, there was a matrix developed which indicated the vulnerability of that site to development.

[Slide.]

The slope was analyzed from its different percentages of slope from zero up to 15 percent, also to indicate vulnerability.

[Slide.]

The slope orientation was analyzed, whether it be facing the early morning sun, the late afternoon sun, the prevailing winds.

[Slide.]

Again, a matrix approach to the level of attractiveness for development.

[Slide.]

This, after many months of different schemes, was the final master plan presented, I think, in December 1984. As you might note, the Fort Mitchell portion has been excluded. The triangular piece to the west has been excluded; State Highway 165 is down the western portion and the railroad is on the east.

The phase I loop is the kidney bean shape to the left. Everything else will be on future phases. There have been some improvements made to the access to the site, to the entrance road. You will see further on in the presentation a little bit about that entrance. Acceleration, deceleration lanes, new striping, a nice formal entrance.

I might mention here that there are 280 plus or minus acres in the total complex. Some 61 of those are being developed in phase I. We have capabilities now for, I think, a total of 12,250 burial sites.

There are some 1.4 miles of loop road in phase I and 8-1/2 acres that will be dedicated totally to interment sites. I think almost 120,000 burial sites are planned in this master plan.

[Slide.]

Moving up this entrance road to the right, there is the administration building. Around the corner kind of tucked in somewhat of a sheltered position are our service and storage buildings.

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Also, included as part of the construction package architecturally are two committal service shelters which are at the top of the loop road and also, though not architecturally, is an assembly flagpole area.

In a design approach, as far as planning goes the whole project as mentioned was very much dictated by the environment, a renewed sensitivity toward preservation of the natural environment. Everything that goes into this project of a landscape variety is native. It is all tied in to the existing terrain, existing vegetation.

[Slide.]

The large plan of our entrance area off of 165, again a very formal type of approach as far as vegetation and planning, but not a real pretentiouis type of an entry. Native stone, flowering trees.

[Slide.]

An elevation of that entrance showing the native flowering trees and stone retaining walls on either side.

[Slide.]

Again, part of the study was undertaken to ascertain exactly which were the most native of the vegetation.

[Slide.]

Burial sites, a roadway, assembly areas and building parts.

The top section is through a burial area. As you will note, as Dean had mentioned, you are not going to find those broad open areas. They will be somewhat buffered from the roadways. There will be an eye level view into every burial area, but you will not find those open broad expanses of prairie. Again, another section at the bottom through the roadway, which shows a sense of scale and privacy throughout the cemetery.

[Slide.]

The assembly area, the flagpole area off of our loop road. Again, no grandiose scheme, just a sensitive design with native landscaping.

[Slide.]

Getting into the building, as I mentioned, there are really four main groups of buildings. Those are the administration building, our service building, storage building, and committal service shelters.

We anticipate no major structures developed throughout the following phases unless there is some additional committal service shelters and some remote toilet facilities.

The administration building off the main entrance road encompasses offices for the director, general office support staff, a waiting reception area for visiting groups, families, operation center which is really the heart and the brain of the operation of the center or the cemetery and the bottom portion of the building here on our slide, toilet facilities for visitors.

[Slide.]

I apologize for this slide but as far as design of the structures themselves, they are somewhat modest in design. Again, no grandiose scheme. We are taking shapes and forms of the adjoining countryside of the Fort Mitchell area, utilizing indigenous materials, four inch exposure lap siding, standing seam metal roofs which somewhat abstract the corrugated metal roofs of some of the sur-

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rounding structures. They are very workable functional buildings, very economical and very presentable in design.

[Slide.]

The service building, as I mentioned, although very presentable, is very utilitarian in nature.

[Slide.]

At the top right-hand corner you will notice the service building itself, which includes several storage bays and maintenance bays. Adjacent to that are parts and tools storage, an office for the foreman, a lunchroom for the field employees, as well as locker room facilities.

At the lower left-hand corner of the slide is a four bay storage building for backhoes and mowing equipment. Also, there is space in this little complex of buildings for yard storage, loading docks, fuel storage and pumping facilities. This building, as mentioned, is sheltered somewhat by the terrain and the vegetation.

[Slide.]

It is again somewhat vernacular in design with gable roofs, some lap siding, although it is utilitarian in nature, with roll up doors.

[Slide.]

The last little group of buidings are the committal service shelters, two of which were included in phase I.

[Slide.]

That site again with a nice intimate setting based on topography and natural vegetation. They are nothing more really than permanent tent type structures. Again, emphasizing similar type materials found in that area.

That is the end of my presentation about the architectural planning. Again, let me emphasize our pleasure in working with the Veterans' Administration, the Department of Memorial Affairs and the Office of Construction.

I will be more than happy at this time, Mr. Chairman, to answer any questions that you or the ladies and gentlemen might have about planning the project.

Mr. SHELBY. I would like to ask a couple of questions.

Mr. WATSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. SHELBY. Are you going to build a chapel? Are there any plans to build a chapel on the cemetery premises?

Mr. WATSON. No, sir. There is a multi-purpose room within the administration building which could serve as that, sir.

Mr. SHELBY. It could serve as the chapel?

Mr. WATSON. Yes, sir. Some of the larger facilities in the past have had separate chapels, but the scope of our work here was to include that in the multi-purpose room.

Mr. HOLT. Mr. Chairman, if I may add to that?

Mr. SHELBY. Certainly, go ahead, Mr. Holt.

Mr. HOLT. We have not built any new chapels in national cemeteries because we feel that the families prefer to have the religious part of the funeral service in their own church or in the chapel of the funeral director.

We provide a committal shelter where the remains can be brought for the final rites before committed to the earth. This has worked well throughout our system. You saw the somewhat elabo-

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rate shelters we have built at Fort Logan and here you see far less than that.

Mr. SHELBY. We appreciate your presentation here this morning.

Mr. WATSON. Yes, sir.

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. Holt, I would like to address some questions to you. What kind of employment do you expect at Fort Mitchell?

Mr. HOLT. Initially we will appoint a director, a secretary, a cemetery representative or administrative assistant. The director will be appointed by the end of 1985. It takes us about 30 days to transfer someone because directors at all national cemeteries come from within our Cemetery of Director Management Program.

Eventually there will be probably a cemetery representative. Plans for wage grade employment have not been finalized at this point, but we are estimating to start with about four to five full-time employees and perhaps four to five temporary employees.

Mr. SHELBY. Let us go back to the time table that you addressed. What has been the delay in implementing the construction of Fort Mitchell?

Mr. HOLT. Initially the site for the Standard Region IV National Cemetery had been selected at Fort Gillem, GA. There were a number of structures on that property which would have required demolition, one of which was a swimming pool, incidentally, which the Army wanted us to replace. We found that these structures would have added over $1 million to the cost of the cemetery development.

The Veterans' Administration went back to look at our other alternatives and in 1981, the Administrator at that time, Mr. Robert Nimmo, decided that Fort Mitchell would be the preferred site.

Availability of the Fort Mitchell property was then contingent upon the State of Alabama's compliance with section 6(f) of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act. Basically, this required the State to substitute other recreational land for the property that would be donated to the Veterans' Administration. This was resolved satisfactorily and a deed was made to the Veterans' Administration in December 1983.

Master plans for the cemetery also required some resolution of design issues, such as road alignment, planting plans, location of committal shelters, and other architectural features that Mr. Watson and his firm have been working on. These have all been worked out and we are progressing very well right now.

Mr. SHELBY. Have you solicited bids for, the first phase of this construction?

Mr. HOLT. No, sir. Those bids will go out, they tell me, by the first of November.

Mr. SHELBY. After you put them on the street, what time frame are you talking about then?

Mr. HOLT. It takes about 30 days to receive these bids and to evaluate them. The lowest responsible bidder will be selected to do the project. By that, I mean they must provide the—

Mr. SHELBY. The usual.

Mr. HOLT. The usual things.

Mr. SHELBY. But as you stated earlier, the project is fully funded. That is unusual by today's standards, isn't it?

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Mr. HOLT. Yes, sir. We usually are able to only get funding for part of it. We get our master plan funded in 1 year and we go back for funding to develop working drawings.

It usually goes through the stage of about 3 or 4 year's budgets before we get a project fully funded. We are very pleased the Congress has funded this one.

Mr. SHELBY. Do you believe that it will open before 1987?

Mr. HOLT. I expect to be there for the dedication around Memorial Day of 1987.

Mr. SHELBY Okay. Is the work at Fort Mitchell going to be conducted by Veterans' Administration employees, or is it going to be contracted out? Do you know?

Mr. HOLT. I cannot give you a definite answer on that, Mr. Shelby. OMB is placing some staffing requirements on us, but our plans at this point are that it will be handled by Veterans' Administration employees.

Mr. SHELBY. Is the policy different from the standpoint of contracting out services at larger cemeteries as opposed to smaller VA cemeteries or is it a uniform policy?

Mr. HOLT. It is a uniform policy overall, but we are taking a look at all of our cemeteries to develop what we call a most efficient organization. We feel that we have an efficient organization, but we are studying every cemetery to make it even more efficient.

Mr. SHELBY. Does VA have a policy now regarding the upright versus flat markers? You know we have had legislative initiatives in that direction, that are still pending. I am particularly interested in Fort Mitchell.

Mr. HOLT. Yes, sir. I must tell you that the current VA policy is that flat granite markers will be used. You know, of course—

Mr. SHELBY. You are also aware of some legislation in the Congress that is pending that would give an optional situation and hopefully break it down by portions of the cemetery?

Mr. HOLT. Yes, sir. The bill that passed the House and is now being considered by the Senate, would provide the next of kin the option of having either the upright marble marker or flat granite. If the bill passes, we will provide sections in the cemetery where the family will have their choice.

Mr. SHELBY. Does not the bill that passed the House and is now pending in the Senate, provide for mostly upright markers except when the family wants flat?

Mr. HOLT. That is correct, sir.

Mr. SHELBY. Has it been your experience that the family basically would prefer the upright marker?

Mr. HOLT. We have started a number of national cemeteries where we have never had anything but flat markers. We have had no complaints, no problems with that area. Where we have converted new sections of existing cemeteries from upright markers to flat markers is where we find a lot of dissatisfaction from the families.

Mr. SHELBY. You mentioned Fort Logan, which is in Colorado. I visited that location several weeks ago. That cemetery land looks like it was cleared as opposed to what you described for Fort Mitchell. You state you are going to use the natural environment, keep as many trees and so forth as you can; is that right?

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Mr. HOLT. Yes, sir; that is correct, sir.

Mr. SHELBY. Is not the construction much more delicate in a situation like Fort Mitchell?

Mr. HOLT. Very much so, yes, sir. It places greater requirements on the architectural firm and it requires more care in the actual construction. It requires that we supervise it much more closely.

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. Holt, what is the projected use, of Fort Mitchell, once it is open and dedicated?

Mr. HOLT. Before I give you any figures, Mr. Chairman, let me tell you that it generally takes a few years for a new cemetery to build up to what we think its potential truly is.

We anticipate about 1,000 interments a year to start at Fort Mitchell and we anticipate gradual increases each year thereafter. Now our projections are optimistic we admit. We think the first year we will bury about 1,056, 1,150 for year two, 1,200 for year three and so forth. The EIS, the environmental impact study done in 1975 estimated even higher. That study says we would inter between 2,000 and 3,000 each year.

Mr. SHELBY. But a lot depends on when it is constructed, and that fact is known to veteran's families.

Mr. HOLT. Yes, sir. That is why we will assign a cemetery director here no later than January 1986, or the first of February, who will start meeting with all the veterans groups and the local organizations here. We will start a lot of public relations and publicity to make people aware that this cemetery is being built here.

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. Holt, we appreciate your appearing here today and we appreciate your presentation. I hope that you are going to get that construction moving.

Mr. HOLT. We will. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. SHELBY. Our next panel will be the Honorable Wallace Brown, probate judge, Russell County, Hon. Jane Gullatt, mayor, Phenix City, and John Franklin, Phenix City Administrator. Will you all please come on up?

Good morning, Judge.

Mr. BROWN. Good morning.

Mr. SHELBY. I am glad to be here in Russell County. I know you have an interest in what is going on in your country as a probate judge. We would appreciate any comments you would like to make. That is why we are here today.

STATEMENT OF WALLACE K. BROWN, PROBATE JUDGE, RUSSELL COUNTY, ALABAMA

Mr. BROWN. I appreciate you letting me come in, Congressman. I am very appreciative of you bringing this type of hearing to Russell County.

It is very informative, it is very professional and it is a real experience for me, as well as the other citizens of Russell County to see this. We appreciate your efforts in getting this moving. It has been very slowly moving. Thank you so much.

Mr. SHELBY. I know, as a probate judge, you will be interested in the construction and the everyday implementation of Fort Mitchell. I think it will mean a lot to Russell County.

Mr. BROWN. It will and we are very grateful.

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Mr. SHELBY. We appreciate your appearing here before us today.
Mr. BROWN. Thank you.
Mr. SHELBY. Do you have anything else to say?
Mr. BROWN. No.
Mr. SHELBY. We have Mrs. Lenora Smith I mentioned earlier. Mrs. Smith, come on up here, please ma'am. A public witness, Clara Mihalko. I know I talked to you over the phone. Mr. Lemuel Downing, Mr. Billy Brescia.
Mr. BRESCIA. That is close enough.
Mr. SHELBY. I want to get it right.
Mr. BRESCIA. Brescia.
Mr. SHELBY. Brescia?
Mr. BRESCIA. Yes, sir.
Mr. SHELBY. Mrs. Smith, your written testimony, if any, will be made a part of the record in its entirety without objection. As I said earlier, you were instrumental in initiating this Fort Mitchell cemetery.

STATEMENT OF LENORA SMITH, ACCOMPANIED BY CLARA MIHALKO, LEMUEL T. DOWNING, JR., AND BILLY BRESCIA

Mrs. SMITH. Thank you, Congressman Shelby. It is certainly a pleasure to welcome you to Phenix City and Russell County and to thank you for your past support which as the chairman of Housing and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee of Veterans' Affairs Committee, you have given us over a period of years.

I second your remarks for Bill Nichols. He asked that I convey those same remarks to this group as his official representative today, since he was uanble to come. We do appreciate his help over the years.

I think this has been a very informative meeting for us. Never before have we had a concrete, onsite, hands-on-type of presentation and I do appreciate the opportunity to have seen what the architectural firm and the Veterans' Administration has done.

I am particularly impressed with their concern for the environment, both the historical environment, by cutting out the sports site area for separate development, the concerns of the natural environment.

It may be interesting to some people who do not know that William Bartram, the famous naturalist, came into this area about 1775 and his book, Bartram Travels, described much of the area of Fort Mitchell. So we have been particularly interested in preserving the natural environment and the use of natural, native materials in the plannings.

I am also quite impressed with the building environment. The buildings will be in keeping with the surrounding area. I think this shows a very sympathetic and caring attitude on the part of the Veterans' Administration to try to fit this wonderful project into the existing area.

I would urge that you continue your efforts to expedite the project. We have waited many years for this to come to fruition. I think all of us perhaps are a little impatient at this point. We first started work on this in 1975.

Mr. SHELBY. It has been 10 years.

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Mrs. SMITH. It really has and our original information was that we would be beginning interments in 1986. I understand now it is going to be 1987. I can understand the difficulties they have had in the land transaction and the planning. I appreciate that, but I do urge that you continue your efforts to keep it on track.

Thank you very much, Congressman Shelby, for giving me this opportunity.

Mr. SHELBY. Thank you.

STATEMENT OF CLARA MIHALKO

Ms. MIHALKO. Mr. Chairman, as a lifelong citizen of this community, this is the greatest thing that has ever happened to our community, our county, and our State. I know of no more appropriate final resting place for our men and women who have served our country than to be at Fort Mitchell in this quite beautiful environment, as well as the fact, that this is one of the most historical places in this area.

The reverrence once held by the first Americans and our first statesmen shall be returned with the coming of the cemetery.

Mr. SHELBY. We appreciate you appearing before the committee today.

STATEMENT OF BILLY BRESCIA

Mr. BRESCIA. Mr. Chairman, all I would like to do is concur with Lenora's comments. I have been more or less inactive on this to a degree but I have been active also from its inception and I am just so pleased that it is finally getting here.

Like Lenora says, even though it has been a little slow coming, we feel like the battle is over now. Now all we have to do is go forward with it because I have been active in veterans' affairs for quite a while in years past. I am just so pleased, and thank you for the time handed to me.

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. Downing.

STATEMENT OF LEMUEL T. DOWNING, JR.

Mr. DOWNING. Congressman, I want to welcome you to Phenix City and Russell County. We are proud to have this hearing here today. I am so proud to be a part of the group of people who have worked so long and so hard, ten years as Lenora said.

I have to echo her and Colonel Taylor who will speak later, and others that have served on various committees throughout the county here, of getting this project done. I am just so proud to have this hearing by you today, and welcome you to Russell County and to hold this hearing.

I think that this is one of the greatest things that has happened to the State of Alabama to have this regional cemetery here. I just waNt to say that I am proud to be a part of the proceedings.

Thank you.

Mr. SHELBY. I appreciate all of you appearing here today. The purpose of this hearing was to have a public hearing in your county where the Fort Mitchell National Cemetery is going to be located, and get an update. We have learned some things today. It is fully funded.

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Secondly we are going to do it. I like what Mrs. Smith said. Let us expedite it. I believe the Veterans' Administration now is in a position to expedite it.

Thank all of you for coming here today.

The next panel consists of Col. Elbert Taylor, Russell County Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Ben Thornhill, county clerk, Mr. Dayton Preston, public witness, and Mr. Claude Parkman. Come on up here. Mr. Parkman, I didn't see you sitting down there.

You were very courteous to me when I was here before back in August, when we talked about Fort Mitchell. That is why we are here today—to have an update.

Colonel Taylor, you may proceed with any comments you want to make regarding the Fort Mitchell National Cemetery.

STATEMENT OF COLONEL ELBERT TAYLOR, ACCOMPANIED BY BEN THORNHILL AND CLAUDE PARKMAN

STATEMENT OF COL. ELBERT TAYLOR

Colonel TAYLOR. Mr. Chairman, it has been so long since this thing started that I believe that a good many people have forgotten maybe the origin, particularly the acquisition of the property.

Mr. SHELBY. Please speak in the microphone so the audience can hear you.

Colonel TAYLOR. Back in the late 1960's when the Congress was debating or discussing altering or adding to the National Military Cemetery System, there was some question about whether each state involved would get a less elaborate smaller national cemetery.

Well, that—we got our information out of the newspaper mostly, so it was found that this Fort Mitchell property, which belonged to the Crowell-Cantey family, which had been in that family ever since it was taken from the Indians. It was found that the property was for sale, so we started investigating and found out that it could be purchased and finally purchased the entire 450 acres remaining of a 16,000 acre Fort Mitchell reservation originally.

After getting the property, there were certain stipulations to the purchase of the property. One was that it would be used for recreational purposes or for a national cemetery.

A second stipulation was that the County would perform perpetual maintenance on the Crowell County Cemetery that was on the property.

So after getting the property, we were trying to get—the County Commission was trying to get additional property east of that, on the north end of the Fort Benning Reservation, to add to it, approximately about 350 acres which had to be declared surplus in order to acquire it.

We got Congressman Nichols down and we were going over that river property. It was mentioned to him about the possibility of a national cemetery on the property that we had acquired. He was very emphatic in the fact that any national cemetery that came to Alabama was going up to Talledega because he already had the place picked out where the Battle of Talledega was fought. A lot of American soldiers are buried there.

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A little later on the when Congress got around and decided there would be regional cemeteries, he joined with Congressman Brinkley and they started pushing for the Fort Mitchell site. They fought manfully for that all the way through to the end, I believe, of 1976.

We had numerous people from the Veterans' Administration, to begin with, all of whom were highly in favor of the site, the best one they ever saw. We had a stream of administration people coming through. They all gave favorable reports, thought it was an outstanding site.

The last person we had in that administration was Veterans' Administration Director Ronderbush. He made a personal trip down here to see it because he had heard such high praise of it and he was duly impressed. He said he didn't think it would be any problem under the next administration, builidng a cemetery at Fort Mitchell. It did not work out that way, as you now.

Then came Mr. Cleeland. The first thing he did was hold another hearing, after we had had some 15 or 20, including a congressional hearing. He said that down to three sites, Fort Mitchell, Fort Gillem and one other, I believe up in Tennessee or South Carolina, and that he was going on over to Fort Gillem that afternoon and he would make a statement in about 3 weeks as to where the cemetery would be.

He went over to Fort Gillem all right and made the statement that the cemetery would be at Fort Gillem at a press conference. We were terribly disappointed. I will never forget how it affected Congressman Nichols. He stated, "I will see them in hell before they put the cemetery at Gillem," or words to that effect.

Being chairman of the subcommitteee that controlled all of the land on military reservations, he had to approve whether it would be declared surplus or not, he was able to hold them off for 4 years. Then when this other administration came in, you are familiar with what happened then. The President apparently said go ahead and construct the cemetery at Fort Mitchell.

Now that is the thing in a nutshell. Lord knows the meetings that we have had, all the discussions that could possibly be made have been made. I conclude my remarks with a true story: When I was a small boy I went to a funeral. This man had three old maid aunts and they had caused him a lot of trouble. Finally, the last one died. She had the nerve to die on a cold January day. The funeral was held in a little old country church with no window panes in the windows and two preachers holding the funeral. They would take turns having an additional thought about what they should say about the old lady.

So they finally finished up and got up to the cemetery and the undertaker says, "Mr. Ware, do you want any kind of service, graveside service?" He said, "Hell, no, get her in the ground and get her covered up. There has been too durn much said already." That is the way some of us are beginning to feel about this cemetery. With that, I end my remarks.

Mr. SHELBY. Colonel, I like your comments and I understand what you are saying. It is well taken at this hearing today. A lot has been said about Fort Mitchell, and it looks like something is going to get done. We are going to stay behind it in the committee.

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As I said earlier, that is why I had this hearing here in Phenix City and Russell County today.

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. Thornhill, do you have any comments?

STATEMENT OF BEN THORNHILL

Mr. THORNHILL. Thank you, Congressman, and we certainly welcome you to Russell County. I would like to yield most of the time on the panel to our chairman, Commissioner Claude Parkman. He has been a commissioner since the inception of the efforts by the county to obtain the cemetery

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. Parkman, do you recall when I was here with you in August and you talked about Fort Mitchell? I am holding this hearing here today to address all of your concerns regarding the actual establishment of the Fort Mitchell National Cemetery. Colonel Taylor talked about it on several occasions. It is time to move the dirt. We appreciate you all being here today.

STATEMENT OF CLAUDE PARKMAN

Mr. PARKMAN. Thank you, Congressman. We appreciate you coming to Phenix City and Russell County to give us an update on what is going on at Fort Mitchell.

Like Mr. Thornhill said, I have been on the County Commission since the Fort Mitchell inception. The County Commission offered 450 acres or as much as the Veterans' Administration needed. We were hoping they would really take the whole thing but they chose not to include the historical part of Fort Mitchell, so the county still retains this particular part of Fort Mitchell.

We are in the process now, through a land and water conservation grant that we got from the State and with matching suport from the county, we are developing Fort Mitchell Park down there. We are cutting roads, having a parking area, picnic area. We hope that what we do will compliment the National Cemetery and I am sure the National Cemetery will compliment the historical part of Fort Mitchell.

We are also in the process of renovating the old Cantey Cemetery. We are redoing the graves and we are going to put a fence around it. We have an individual in the county who is furnishing all of the support, all the work, all the money and we think it is going to be a beautiful cemetery when it is completed.

We are just deligthed that we are going to have a groundbreaking here in the near future. This is a project that has more support than any project that I can remember and we are just glad that it is becoming a reality.

Mr. SHELBY. Thank you. I agree with what you are saying, that after 10 years it is time to move some dirt. I appreciate the three of you appearing before the committee today. We all have the same interests at heart.

Our next panel is going to be Col. Jimmy Moore. Is Colonel Moore here? Col. Jimmy Moore? He is not here.

Lt. Col. Anthony F. Caggiano. Is he here? These are the people from Georgia. Maj. Gen. William Steele, Chattahochee Valley, Fort Benning Chapter. Yes, sir, I met you earlier in the courthouse, General Steele.

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General STEELE. Thank you very much.

Mr. SHELBY. Read your testimony, it will be made a part of the record in its entirety. General, we appreciate you being here today, please proceed with your comments.

STATEMENT OF MAJ. GEN. WILLIAM B. STEELE

General STEELE. Thank you, Congressman Shelby. I appreciate the opportunity to be here today. As you indicated, I am here on behalf of the Chattahooche Valley Fort Benning Chapter of the Association of the United States Army, of which there are several thousand members. I am also here as a retired military individual, so I kind of speak for the retired community as well.

I will not go into the remarks that I have already submitted since they will be in the record and I will not reiterate them here today, except to say that we do very strongly support the installation of the cemetery in this area for the reasons that we have indicated.

I would like to take a few moments though, to express my appreciation for the hearing that is being held here today. It is sort of unusual for the Congressmen to come to the people in the area. Ususally it is the other way around, and I want to thank you for being here today and giving us a chance to participate.

I think from the number of people here today that you have our suport in the efforts that you are making to make sure that this cemetery gets done in an expeditious manner.

I apprceciate also the presentation that was made by the people today from the architectural firm and from the veterans' organization, the memorial portion of it, that is, putting in the cemetery because it is awfully important when you do things like this that you do it right.

I think the way they are going about this is right. It is the kind of cemetery that we want in this area and the people who have served in the military and other government services who will been interred there, will want to be a part of that type of environment.

In summary, I would just say that we are glad it is here and I am with you, let us get on with it. Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of General Steele appears on p. 29.]

Mr. SHELBY. General, I want to say that we are glad to have a man of your stature, appear before a hearing of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. As a retired major general, you speak well for veterans.

The cemetery is funded, but we have to get on track and get it moving. I think it is good to have public hearings. We hold many field hearings because the average citizen cannot go to Washington for an oversight hearing. As this cemetery is going to be located here in Russell County, this is the proper place for a hearing to update the facts. It is important to let the people who have been instrumental in getting it moving to know the status.

Thank you, General.

General STEELE. Thank you.

Mr. SHELBY. Our next panel will consist of Mr. Frank Wilkes, Alabama Department of Veterans' Affairs for the State, and Mr. James Hinson, Russell County Veterans' Council.

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Gentlemen, please come up. I do not think Mr. Wilkes is a stranger to any of you. He is very active, in his official capacity with the Department of Veterans' Affairs, State of Alabama. He speaks well for the State, the Governor and us.

Mr. Wilkes, we are glad to have you join us and participate in this hearing which we hope will help expedite the Fort Mitchell National Cemetery.

STATEMENTS OF FRANK D. WILKES, ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS AND JAMES L. HINSON, RUSSELL COUNTY VETERANS' COUNCIL

STATEMENT OF FRANK D. WILKES

Mr. WILKES. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I bring you greetings from Governor Wallace.

I would like to begin by saying that it is a personal privilege and honore for me to appear before you today in this presenting of the views of the 130 employees of the Alabama Department of Veterans' Affairs, who represent the 437,000 veterans and their families of our great State.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to take just a moment, if I could, to inform the committee, yourself, of the fact that we are celebrating our fourtieth anniversary in the Alabama Department of Veterans' Affairs.

We are very proud of the Alabama legislature in creating our department back 40 years ago to provide professional claims assistance to the veterans returning from World War II and to their families. We have offices in every county of Alabama, 84 offices in 67 counties and it is our privilege and honor to provide Veterans' Affairs service to them.

Mr. Chairman, as you well know, the country's aging veteran population, especially in our veterans of the World War II era is growing at a rapid rate. Many of thee veterans are migrating into the Sunbelt States, of which right now I think Florida is almost full and Alabama is getting a lot of those. We are expecting our World War II veteran population to more than double from its current 65,000 to over 130,000 within the next 5 years.

We in Alabama in the Department of Veterans' Affairs believe that these brave and patriotic Americans should be provided the most adequate services to meet their long-term medical care needs which will be of a demand to us.

Our Department, in conjunction with the veterans' organizations of our great State, has taken the necessary action to create our first State Veterans' Home, which is going to be located in Alexander City and we are carefully studying the real possibility of establishing two to three more additional homes for this special group of veterans.

I would like to highly commend you and the members of Congress for creating the State Veterans' Home Grant Programs which provides Federal funds to assist the States in establishing these meaningful and needed facilities.

I want to also assure you that Alabama will always stand ready to serve our veterans who are the most important class of citizens in this great State of ours.

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If I may, let me also express on behalf of the almost 30 millions of America, our deepest appreciation to you and to the Con ress for your faithful support and dedication in preserving the ben fits and services for all veterans who have given of themselves honorably while serving our country in her time of need.

Let us never forget that our veterans have paid the price, and yes, oftentimes a supreme price, by the giving of their lives to protect the very existence of our great country of ours, America, the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Mr. Chairman, we are all gathered here today with a genuine sense of deep pride and honor for the establishment of Fort Mitchell Cemetery. We owe a great, great debt of gratitude to the Veterans' Administration for selecting the site. However, I do not know that everyone here is aware of some of the real problems that existed since, I think it was initiated about 1975 or 1976, when the whole idea of a needed cemetery came about in this area. I think it is appropriate to inform all present, that securing this marvelous facility did not come easy.

I think, as you realize, that the choice at that time in 1976 was a consideration between Fort Gillem, Georgia and here at Fort Mitchell.

As you are aware, the Carter administration at that time was pushing real hard for the Georgia site. However, Congressman Bill Nichols and others intervened on behalf of Fort Mitchell and Congressman Nichols, as I understand it, discovered that the Veterans' Administration, for whatever reasons, were going to select the Georgia site. In addition Mr. Nichols learned that the land selected for the cemetery at Fort Gillem was nothing more than a waste dump.

I do not know if everybody is aware of that, but it was being used for that purpose by the Army. I just cannot imagine the Veterans' Administration or this country would consider spending any money to establish a cemetery in honor of our veterans that would amount to a dump site, but due to the conscientious efforts of Congressman Nichols and many others that went to the mat, they knew that the Veterans' Administration was going to have to spend thousands of dollars to fill in the particular area at Fort Gillem with fill dirt in order to bury our veterans.

We do owe a great debt of gratitude to Congressman Nichols in his courageous fight in securing this most beautiful and peaceful site as a final resting plae for our deserving veterans.

Other members of the Alabama delegation deserve our thanks for their efforts in support of this project. Especially you, Mr. Chairman, for taking time from your busy schedule to come here today to make the public aware of this most important facility and the fact that it will be serving the very needs of our veterans in the future. It is my understanding that the Veterans' Administration will be opening some 10,000 sites at Fort Mitchell sometime in the early part of 1987 with an ultimate interment being somewhere around 150,000.

I can assure you, as I heard testimony earlier, that the Alabama Department of Veterans' Affairs, along with the other great veterans organizations of our State, will take every effort possible to properly publicize this great cemetery across our State and make

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our veterans aware that they have a right to be interred here, if they so desire

This is truly a great day for our 437,000 veterans of Alabama, that they will soon have a cemetery which is going to be created in their honor and will stand forever as a living tribute to them.

Thank you, and I appreciate the time and opportunity to be with you.

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. Wilkes, we appreciate you being here and we appreciate your remarks.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Wilkes appears on p. 31.]

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. James L. Hinson is with the Russell County Veterans' Council.

STATEMENT OF JAMES L. HINSON

Mr. HINSON. Thank you, Congressman Shelby.

I do appreciate the members being here and the members of the subcommittee as well.

It is my pleasure and honor at this time, Congressman, to appear before the committee and present views relative to the already approved and funded Fort Mitchell, Alabama National Cemetery.

These views, Mr. Chairman, are presented on behalf of the Russell County Members of the Chattahoochee Valley Veterans' Council, some of which are sitting in the audience at the present time.

Before I proceed, Congressman, I would like to pause right now to speak for myself personally and for the entire service organization makeup of this great area, in gratitude for the interest and concern for the needs of the veterans and their dependents and survivors that is consistently shown by this committee and its members.

Historically, we have looked to Congress, both the House and the Senate, as the champion of those causes that concern veterans.

We are very much aware that members of Congress are the direct representatives of our people, and through all the years, it has been our experience that Congress responds more immediately and effectively than other branches of government to the problems of those who have defended the Nation in its Armed Forces.

We know, as well, that you, Congressman, depend on hearing the concerns voiced by the grass roots, and I can say today that you have our full commitment, without reservation, to keep you completely informed as to what is felt to be important by your constituency in this part of our great state.

Incidentally, Congressman Shelby, an example of untiring efforts on behalf of the needs was recently manifested by the presentation of almost 15,000 petitions to a feasibility committee in support of the construction of a much needed VA outpatient clinic in Columbus, GA, who are our neighbors just east of us here across the river.

Mr. Chairman, I will not labor you with a lot of rhetoric about why we need our Fort Mitchell National Cemetery because I am sure you already know why better than I.

I will emphasize, however, Congressman, time is of essence, in my view, because just looking at one segment of veteran population, which Mr. Wilkes has already alluded to, there are over

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60,000 World War II veterans in our great State. And as you can see, we are everything but spring chickens.

We are told by expert demographers that this number will increase to something around 120,000 by 1991, due to the heavy migration from the northern tier states.

To be sure, then, you will have our continued support in the months and years ahead as you seek to keep very much intact our VA Department of Memorial Affairs, which is our knight in shining armor, if you will, in fulfilling its mission to the men and women who served in the Armed Forces.

In retrospect, we get excited about the vision that Mr. Lincoln had when he signed the 1862 legislation authorizing establishment of national cemeteries.

This is an enthusiasm which continues, because in the last 50 years, Mr. Shelby, there have been many positive changes in the National Cemetery system.

The most significant, we feel, was the transfer of the 82 National Cemeteries to the Veterans' Administration in June of 1973.

They have done a magnificent job in taking care of all our veterans' programs and in the particular area of memorial affairs.

Presently, Congressman Shelby, we are excited about the beautiful 280 acres at Fort Mitchell, Alabama being developed, and we trust that you and your fine committee will do all that is possible to preclude any undue delays in providing the planned 10,000 sites, administrative and service building and hopefully a chapel, for practical use in late 1986 or early 1987 as phase I is completed.

Our county, as you might well have already noticed, has done a splendid job of identifying that area of Fort Mitchell, and I believe I can say without hesitation or reservation that there are more than 63,000 eligible veterans in the Chattahoochee Valley area that will rally to your support, Congressman Shelby, in any direction you deem appropriate relative to memorial affairs and other benefits as well.

We would hope that legislation will be considered to overturn the Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act of 1981 that restricted payment of a burial allowance that has been provided to all honorably discharged war veterans.

Almost 90 percent of the veteran population was affected by that act.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, it is our perception that memorial affairs has improved immeasurably since it was placed under VA's jurisdiction, and we trust that Congress will continue to support the VA's plan with the modest funding needed for that program.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement, and again, we do appreciate this opportunity to present these views to the subcommittee.

Mr. SHELBY. We appreciate your testimony, as well as that of Mr. Wilkes', this morning.

You appeared here because you are very interested in veterans. You have shown that repeatedly over the years, and you are particularly interested in the Fort Mitchell expedition.

Thank you both.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hinson appears on p. 34.]

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STATEMENTS OF JAMES H. JACKSON, STATE COMMANDER, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS, ACCOMPANIED BY BILLY R. BLACK, DAV NATIONAL SERVICE OFFICER; E. W. ROBINSON, STATE COMMANDER, THE AMERICAN LEGION, ACCOMPANIED BY HENRY MAYS, COMMANDER, AMERICAN LEGION POST 331; GORDON SHEWMAKE, SERVICE OFFICER, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

Mr. SHELBY. Our last panel today will be our State Commander James Jackson, Disabled American Veterans; State Commander E. W. Robinson, the American Legion; Commander Henry Mays, American Legion Post 331; Mr. Mark Brown, AMVETS, and Mr. Gordon Shewmake, Veterans of Foreign Affairs.

Come right up, Mr. Shewmake.

I want to say before you get started that Senator Hal Heflin has contacted me. He has a statement for the record. He regrets having prior obligations, but is in support of the cemetery.

Mr. Jackson, your written testimony, will be made a part of the record. You may comment as you choose.

STATEMENT OF JAMES JACKSON

Mr. JACKSON. Thank you, Congressman.

On behalf of the over 13,900 Disabled American Veterans, I appreciate the opportunity to present our views on the establishment of the VA National Cemetery at Fort Mitchell, Alabama.

Mr. Chairman, the Disabled American Veterans of Alabama wish to commend you and your subcommittee for the leadership role you have played, as we believe your efforts have brought about the change of the National Cemetery from Fort Gillem, Georgia, to Fort Mitchell, Alabama, giving those who have served our nation's Armed Forces from the State of Alabama a final resting place in Alabama.

As you are probably aware, it is the wish of the Disabled American Veterans that a National Cemetery be in every State in the United States of America, in honor of those who have served this great country and have been called upon to defend her against her enemies.

Mr. Chairman, in essence of time, I am going to conclude my remarks, and again, just thank you and your subcommittee for being present today.

I would like to ask our National Service Officer, Mr. Billy Black, to make a few comments.

[The prepared statement of Commander Jackson appears on p. 40.]

Mr. SHELBY. Go right ahead, Mr. Black.

STATEMENT OF BILLY R. BLACK

Mr. BLACK. Thank you, Congressman Shelby.

I would like to thank you for the leadership role you are playing in the full funding of this first phase of the Fort Mitchell Cemetery. I feel that this issue has been pretty well covered today.

I would like to also bring up a couple of other issues today.

I would also like to thank you also for the leadership role you played in passing the Compensation and Health Care Amendment

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of 1985 by the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, which established a 3.7 percent increase in VA compensation, as well as adding additional statutory health benefits to the service connected disabled veterans.

We commend you highly for that act.

Also, you know it just passed in the Senate, the Rudman-Gramm-Hollins Balanced Budget Act. We feel that this is going to again affect the disabled veterans in a dramatic way in curtailing the benefits we have earned.

We feel that this is unjust. We feel that the disabled veteran is being again penalized as well as many other people in the United States today.

We feel that disabled veterans again should not be sligthed by the so-called budget proposal with the budget ax again.

We would like to challenge you and the members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee to take the leadership role and take on additional leadership roles in seeing that the Balanced Budget ax is not again laid on disabled veterans.

We would like to ask you to defend the Disabled Veterans' Benefits Program services that we receive today.

Mr. SHELBY. If it is balanced, don't balance it on the back of the disabled veteran, right?

Mr. BLACK. Yes, sir.

Congressman Shelby, I would like to thank you for allowing me to appear and to present my views also today.

Mr. SHELBY. Thank you.

Commander Robinson.

STATEMENT OF E. W. ROBINSON

Mr. ROBINSON. Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, as the newly elected State Commander of the American Legion, Department of Alabama, it is an honor and a personal privilege for me to appear before this distinguished committee today, to present the views of some 22,33 members of our great organization regarding the establishment of a Veterans' National Cemetery at Fort Mitchell, Alabama.

If I may, please allow me one moment, before giving my statement, to express on behalf of the 2,536,000 members of the American Legion throughout America, our sincere appreciation for the infallible support shown by the Congress for the welfare of the men and women of our armed forces who have defended the freedoms and principles of our great nation.

As you well know, Mr. Chairman, the American Legion believes, as a fundamental principle, that the duty to bear arms in the defense of America is a basic obligation of the citizenship, and with this obligation there exists an equal commitment on the part of the nation not to forget those who have fulfilled their obligation in honorably serving our country during the time of war.

The American Legion is most grateful for the interest and concern of the U.S. Congress, and we rely on you to preserve the programs and entitlements that have been genuinely earned by our veterans.

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On behalf of the American Legion Department of Alabama, I am most proud to express our sincere appreciation to the Veterans' Administration for selecting Fort Mitchell, Alabama, as the site of a National Cemetery for veterans.

This cemetery will serve as the regional national cemetery for Standard Federal Region IV, which includes Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee.

As you well know, Mr. Chairman, all other States except Alabama and Georgia in region IV have two or more national cemeteries.

This site of 279 acres holds a most beautiful and serene environment of which the veterans so richly deserve as a final resting place.

Mr. Chairman, Alabama's veterans have not had access to a National Cemetery for several years in that the Mobile Cemetery has been closed for some time.

With the creation of this cemetery, the 437,000 patriotic veterans of Alabama will have the rightful opportunity to be interred in a National Cemetery which is established in their honor.

I would like to commend you for your efforts in the establishment of this drastically needed National Cemetery plus your thoughtfulness in organizing this hearing to publicly announce the creation of this beautiful facility, which I understand will be completed in early 1987.

Allow me further to express my appreciation on behalf of the American Legion, to the entire Alabama Congressional Delegation, especially Honorable Bill Nichols, for their efforts in seeing this dream become a reality.

This completes my statement, and again on behalf of the American Legion, Department of Alabama, we are extremely proud of the creation of this everlasting memorial for our deserving veterans.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Robinson appears on p. 44.]

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. Shewmake.

STATEMENT OF GORDON SHEWMAKE

Mr. SHEWMAKE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is my privilege to serve the more than 27,370 men and women of Veterans of Foreign Wars, Department of Alabama as Veterans Service Officer.

As veterans' servce officer, I wish to express our appreciation for this opportunity to comment on the Veterans' Cemetery to be located at Fort Mitchell, Alabama.

Mr. Chairman, I am sure that you know that the Veterans' Cemetery in Mobile, Alabama, is unable to care for our veterans who wish to be interred in a Government cemetery due to the unavailability of space.

Therefore, the VFW, along with our sister organizations, have been in the forefront in trying to secure the Veterans' Cemetery at Fort Mitchell, Alabama.

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We were pleased when the site of Fort Mitchell was approved and are eagerly awaiting the time that this facility will become available for the burial of our veterans who wish to be buried in a veterans' cemetery.

It is our understanding that 279 acres ten miles south of Phenix City, Alabama has been approved by the Veterans' Administration for this cemetery with phase I consisting of 61 acres targeted for completion in late April 1987, with the dedication tentatively planned for May 1987, hopefully on Memorial Day.

We understand that phase I will satisfy the needs of our veterans until at least 1995 with additional space opened as needed.

We further understand that the project has been funded in the amount of $4,038,000, and that the plans are complete, and the contracts are to be finalized in the near future.

For too long Alabama's veterans who have wished to be buried in a veterans' cemetery, a right granted by the Congress of the United States, have been denied that right due to unavailability of space within a reasonable distance of their homes.

The completion of the Fort Mitchell site will again restore the right which is justly theirs.

The Fort Mitchell Cemetery is needed now. We hope that every means available will be utilized to see that the cemetery is completed on schedule with no delays. The Veterans of Foreign Wars are eagerly awaiting this accomplishment.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, along with this subcommittee, for your outstanding support of our veterans' needs and entitlements.

Mr. Chairman, this completes our statement.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Shewmake appears on p.46.]

Mr. SHELBY. I want to thank all of you for appearing here in Russell County, Phenix City, Alabama, on behalf of the Fort Mitchell National Cemetery project and other needs of veterans.

It is good to have field hearings. We have them around the country.

We had one on housing in Denver a couple of weeks ago. However, I did go out to see the Fort Logan Cemetery because I knew I was coming here.

Prior to that, we had hearings in Los Angeles regarding fraud in the Veterans' Housing Program, and last week, we were in Trenton, NJ. We are trying to protect the Veterans' Housing Program as well as make the cemetery program, such as Fort Mitchell, work well.

We do appreciate your being here. This will conclude our hearing today.

[Whereupon, at 10:56 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

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APPENDIX

Statement of Dean W. Holt

Department of Memorial Affairs

Veterans Administration

Before the

Subcommittee on Housing and Memorial Affairs

House Veterans Affairs Committee

Phenix City, Alabama

October 25, 1985

Good Morning, Mr. Chairman:

I would like to thank you in behalf of Acting Chief Memorial Affairs Director Arthur Hamerschlag for the opportunity to appear before you today, and to provide you with an update on the Ft. Mitchell National Cemetery.

Ft. Mitchell will serve as the regional cemetery for Standard Federal Region IV, which is comprised of eight southeastern states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. It is the last of the regional cemeteries to be built, and will complete the regional concept adopted in the mid - 1970's as a means of distributing national cemetery gravespace on a more equitable geographic basis thoughout the United States. The Ft. Mitchell National Cemetery will have grave space to meet the burial needs of veterans in this area for many years to come, in fact well beyond our long-range planning year of 2030.

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As you are aware, we did not get started on the regional cemetery for Standard Region IV as early as we had planned. Although another site was originally selected, that was found to be more costly to develop, and the decision was made in 1981 to build the cemetery here at Ft. Mitchell. There were some complications in getting the land transferred to the VA, but I am pleased to say that everything is on track now, and that I am going to be able to give you a very good report.

Ft. Mitchell has a rich cultural heritage which we believe will blend well with the historic and patriotic values associated with a national cemetery. The site was deeded by the State of Alabama to the VA in December of 1983. It consists of 279 acres of land in east Russell County, about 10 miles south of the Columbus, Georgia - Phenix City, Alabama metropoliton area. Access to the site is from State Highway 165. Natural vegetation is dominated by an oak - hickory - pine forest.

The area was orignally inhabited by native Americans of the Muscogee or Creek Nation. Historic Port Mitchell was an early frontier military post located immediately adjacent to our property. A small family cemetery dating from the 1830's already exists on the property, where several military officers are buried. There are also the foundations of a mid - nineteenth century plantation, the Cantey Plantation. VA is proud to be adding to the rich history of the Ft. Mitchell area, and is planning future construction carefully so that important archeological features will be preserved.

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Construction for the first phase development is funded at $4,038,000. That includes $300,000 for the master plan and $3,738,000 for Phase I construction. The Phase I construction project calls for development of 61 acres, an entrance gate and drive, a loop road, administration and service buildings, two committal shelters, a flagpole/assembly area, and development of approximately 10,000 gravesites. Based on current projections, the first phase would provide for interments through the year 1995. Furture projects will be scheduled to develop additional burial areas as needed.

Our schedule runs as follows:

Milestone:	Estimated Date:
Master plan completed	December 1984
Contract documents completed	September 1985
Advertise/accept bids	November 1985
Start construction (Phase I)	January 1986
Complete construction (Phase I)	April 1987
Cemetery dedication	May 1987
Begin operations	June 1987

I must emphasize that the milestone dates are estimates, and are subject to change. This will give you a general overview of the process however, and a reasonable approximation of how long it will take.

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Mr. Chairman, I understand that you recently visited the Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver, Colorado. That was originally established in the 19th century, and represents a concept in cemetery design which was far less responsive to the environment than the approach we use today. Ft. Mitchell will be located in a rural setting with beautiful natural vegetation and an important cultural heritage. Our goal is to provide a serene and aesthetically pleasing facility which will relate to the long-term needs of the environment and preserve the sense of history which pervades this truly unique location.

We have with us today Mr. Michael Watson, who represents the joint venture firm which was selected to prepare the master plan for the overall development of the cemetery. With your permission, he will give you a more detailed and pictorial view of the Ft. Mitchell National Cemetery.

That concludes my formal statement, Mr. Chairman. I would be pleased to answer any questions, either now or later.

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REMARKS TO THE VETERANS AFFAIRS SUB COMMITTEE AT A CLOSED HEARING

IN PHENIX CITY, ALABAMA

ON OCTOBER 25, 1985

(BY MG (RET) WILLIAM B. STEELE)

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the Chattahoochee Valley Chapter of the Association of the United States Army. I am William B. Steele, a retired Army Major General currently employed as a Vice President of the American Family Life Assurance Company whose home office is located in Columbus. Therefore, although I am here representing the local membership of the AUSA, I am also representative of the retired military community, the business community and the local citizenry.

We strongly support the location of a national cemetery at Fort Mitchell, Alabama. This is an ideal location for a number of reasons.

First the site is historically significant. In the area, there are already 23 graves of victims of the Seminole and Creek Indian wars, as well as the grave of Alabama's first congressman. Also, Fort Mitchell is considered by historians as the beginning of the "Trail of Tears" along which thousands of Lower Creek Indians, who had been defrauded of their land in southeast Alabama, were marched to Oklahoma. Many of these unfortunates died along the way. The fort itself was constructed during the Indian uprisings that occurred during the year of 1812 and was rebuilt in 1820. Reportedly, the Marquis de Lafayette, the Revolutionary War hero and Francis Scott Key, author of "The Star Spangled Banner" both visited the site. Also significant is the fact that the last land battle of the Civil War was fought at Columbus, Georgia just a few miles north of the site.

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Second, it is centrally located in the southeastern part of the United States and easily accessible to visitors by railroad, highways and air transportation.

Third, the Fort Benning Military Reservation lies just across the Chattahoochee River. Fort Benning is also historically significant having supported the training of soldiers for World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the War in Vietnam. It could also serve as the means of ceremonial support for activities at the cemetery.

Fourth, there are probably over one-half million veterans living within a 100 mile radius of Fort Mitchell. I'm sure that these veterans and the people in the Phenix City, Alabama - Columbus, Georgia area would like to have the cemetery located at Fort Mitchell. The cemetery could, therefore, expect to have ample community support.

Finally, the area has ample engineering, construction, housing and other such support needed for the facility.

In summary, it appears to us that Fort Mitchell is a very appropriate site for a national cemetery from an environmental as well as a historic viewpoint. We urge that Fort Mitchell be the site chosen and that work begin as soon as possible.

Thank you for letting me appear before you and for your kind attention to my remarks.

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Statement by Frank D. Wilkes, Director, Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs before the U. S. House of Representatives Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Housing and Memorial Affairs, Phenix City, Alabama, October 25, 1985.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, it is indeed a personal privilege and honor for me to appear before this most distinguished committee today to present the views of the 130 employees of the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs located in 84 offices throughout the state. Mr. Chairman I would like to take a moment to inform the Committee of our Department's purpose in Alabama. This year we are celebrating our 40th anniversary in providing professional and compassionate claims assistance to Alabama's 437,000 veterans plus their dependents and survivors. Our Department is extremely proud to represent 95% of these deserving Alabamians by filing claims on their behalf before the Veterans Administration. The Department has the privilege of being the accredited service representative of the 22,300 members of the American Legion Department of Alabama plus the Military Order of Purple Heart and World War I Veterans Incorporated. During fiscal year 1983-84, the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs was chiefly responsible for the VA's awarding over $350 million in direct benefits to our veterans and their families. Mr. Chairman, as you well know, America's aging World War II veterans are currently migrating in tremendous numbers to the sunbelt states and the Veterans Administration has projected Alabama's World War II population will rise from its current 35,000 to over 130,000 by the year 1990. This brave and patriotic group of American's will cause drastic increased demands in the VA medical centers and nursing homes in this area. Our Department has already finalized plans for construction of our first state veterans home in

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Alexander City and we are carefully studying the real possibility of establishing two, and possibly three more facilities to meet the medical care needs for this special group of veterans. I would like to highly commend this Committee and the Congress for creating the State Veterans Home Grant Program which provides Federal funds to assist states in establishing these meaningful and needed facilities. Let me assure you that Alabama will always stand ready to serve our veterans who are the most important class of citizens in this state.

If I may, let me also express on behalf of the almost 30 million veterans of America our deepest appreciation to this Committee and the Congress for your faithful support and dedication and preserving the benefits and services for all veterans who have given of themselves honorably while serving our country in her time of need. Let us never forget that our veterans have paid the price, and often the supreme price, by giving their lives to protect the very existence of this great country of ours. "America the land of the free and the home of the brave!" Mr. Chairman, we are all gathered here today with a genuine sense of pride and deep appreciation for the establishment of the deserving national veterans cemetery here in Ft. Mitchell, Alabama. All of us are extremely proud of the Veterans Administration for selecting this site; however, I feel it is most appropriate to inform all present that securing this marvelous facility to be did not come easy. In 1976 the VA was considering the location of a national cemetery in either Ft. Gillem, Georgia, or here at Ft. Mitchell. As the Committee is already aware, at that time the Carter administration was pushing real hard for the Georgia site, however, the Honorable Bill Nichols, a combat-wounded veteran from World War II from Alabama,

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intervened on behalf of Ft. Mitchell. Congressman Nichols discovered that the VA, for political reasons, was going to select the Georgia site. In addition, he learned that the land selected for the cemetery at Ft. Gillem was nothing more than a waste dump for the U. S. Army. Can you imagine that the VA was considering the idea of spending hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars to fill in the 400 plus acre dump site with eight feet of dirt and then create a cemetery for our veterans. Congressman Nichols went to the mat on this issue with the VA and told them he would never allow our nation's honored dead to be buried in a garbage dump. We owe a great debt of gratitude to Congressman Nichols for his courageous fight in securing this most beautiful and peaceful site for a final resting place for our deserving veterans. Other members of the Alabama Congressional Delegation deserve our thanks for their efforts in supporting this project. Alabama's veterans organizations also played a vital role in seeing this dream become a reality. Let me also commend this Committee and especially you, Mr. Chairman, for taking time from your busy schedules to have this hearing in order to properly recognize the significance of the establishment of this most needed facility. It is my understanding that the VA is planning to open some 10,000 grave sites here at Ft. Mitchell by January 1987 with the ultimate sites for interment being 150,000. The establishment of Ft. Mitchell will finally make available a national cemetery for our veterans, as neither Alabama nor Georgia has had an open national cemetery for many years. This is truly a great day for the 437,000 veterans of Alabama as they will soon have a cemetery which is created in their honor and will stand forever as a living tribute to them. Thank you.

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STATEMENT OF JAMES L. HINSON, REPRESENTING CHATTAHOOCHEE VALLEY VETERANS COUNCIL MEMBERS IN RUSSELL COUNTY, ALABAMA BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS-HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

October 25, 1985

Honorable Congressman Shelby and Members of the Subcommittee:

Honorable Congressman Shelby and Members of the Subcommittee:

It is my pleasure and honor at this time to appear before the Committee and present views relative to the approved and funded Ft. Mitchell, Alabama National Cemetery. These views, Mr. Chairman, are presented on behalf of the Russell County Members of the Chattachoochee Valley Veterans Council, and specifically from our Veterans Service Office, Russell County, Alabama. Be .re I proceed further, Mr. Chairman, may I pause long enough to speak, for myself personally, and for the entire service organization makeup of this area, in gratitude for the interest and concern for the needs of veterans, their dependents and survivors that is consistently shown by this committee and its members. Historically, we have looked to Congress, both the House and Senate, as the champion of those causes that concern veterans. We are very much aware that members of Congress are the direct representatives of the people, and through all the years, it has been our experience that Congress responds more immediately and effectively than other branches of government to the problems of those who have defended the nation in its Armed Forces. We know, as well, that you depend on hearingthe concerns voiced by the grass roots, and I can say today that you have our full commitment, without reservation, to keep you completely informed as to what is felt to be important by your constituency in this part of our Great State. Incidentally, an example of untiring efforts on behalf of needs, was recently manifested by the presentation of almost 15,000 petitions to a feasibility committee in support of the construction of a much needed VA outpatient clinic in columbus, GA, our neighbor just to the East.

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Mr. Chairman, I will not labor you with a lot of rhetoric about why we need our Ft. Mitchell National Cemetery because I'm sure you already know why. I will emphasize, however, time is of essence in my view, because just looking at one segment of veteran population, there are over 60,000 WWII veterans in our great State (and as you can see, we are everything but spring chickens), and we told by expert demographers that this number will increase to around 120,000 by 1991 due to the migration from the northern tier states. To be sure, Mr. Chairman, you will have our continued support in the months and years ahead as you seek to keep very much in tact, our VA Department of Memorial Affairs, (our Knight in Shining Armor) in fulfilling its mission to the men and women who served in the Armed Forces.

In retrospect, we get excited about the vision that Mr. Lincoln had when he signed the 1862 legislation authorizing establishment of national cemeteries; an enthusiasm continues because in the last 50 years, there have been many positive changes in the National Cemetery System. The most significant, we feel, was the transfer of 82 national cemeteries to the Veterans Administration in June 1973; they have done a magnificent job in taking care of all veterans programs and in the particular area of Memorial Affairs.

Presently, Congressman Shelby, we are as excited about the beautiful 280 acres at Ft. Mitchell, Alabama being developed and we trust you and your fine committee will do all that is possible to preclude any undue delays in providing the planned 10,000 sites, administrative and service building and chapel for practical use in late1986 or early 1987 as Phase I is completed. Our County has already done a splendid job of identifying the area. I believe we can say without hesitation or

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reservation the more than 63,000 eligible veterans in the Chattahoochee Valley area will rally to your support in any direction you deem appropriate relative to Memorial Affairs and other Veterans Benefits as well. We would hope that legislation will be considered to overturn the Omnibus budget and Reconciliation Act of 1981 that restricted payment of the burial allowance that had been provided to all honorably discharged war veterans. Almost 90% of the veteran population was affected. In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, it is our perception that Memorial Affairs has improved immeasurably since it was placed under VA jurisdiction, and we trust the Congress will continue to support VA's plans with the modest funding needed for the program.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes our statement and again, we appreciate this opportunity to present these views to the Sub-committee.

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STATEMENT OF SENATOR HOWELL HEFLIN
BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE, ON BEHALF OF MY CONSTITUENTS ACROSS ALABAMA, I AM VERY PLEASED THAT YOU ARE LOOKING INTO THE STATUS OF THE VETERANS NATIONAL CEMETERY IN FORT MITCHELL, ALABAMA.

I WAS VERY PLEASED WHEN THE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION, IN 1981, CHOSE FORT MITCHELL AS THE SITE OF A NATIONAL CEMETERY, OVERTURNING THE EARLIER SELECTION OF WHAT PROVED TO BE A MORE COSTLY SITE.

ALTHOUGH THE NATIONAL CEMETERY SYSTEM WAS BEGUN DURING THE CIVIL WAR, IT WAS SOME TEN YEARS AGO THAT THE VA DEFINED THEIR CURRENT OBJECTIVE OF PROVIDING ONE LARGE NATIONAL CEMETERY FOR EACH OF THE TEN STANDARD FEDERAL REGIONS, PLUS ANOTHER FOR THE WASHINGTON, D. C. AREA. WHEN THE FORT MITCHELL NATIONAL CEMETERY IS COMPLETED, IT WILL BE THE LAST REGIONAL CEMETERY ESTABLISHED UNDER THIS CONCEPT, WHICH WAS INITIALLY ADOPTED AS A MEANS OF ENSURING A MORE EQUITABLE GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF NATIONAL CEMETERY GRAVE SPACE.

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STATISTICS SHOW THAT THE NUMBER OF ELDERLY VETERANS IS RAPIDLY INCREASING. IT IS ESTIMATED THAT BY SHORTLY AFTER THE YEAR 2000, THE NUMBER OF VETERANS AGED 65 OR OLDER WILL BE DOUBLE THE CURRENT LEVEL. AT THE SAME TIME, THE STATES WHICH WILL BE SERVICED BY THE FORT MITCHELL NATIONAL CEMETERY -- ALABAMA, FLORIDA, GEORGIA, KENTUCKY, MISSISSIPPI, NORTH CAROLINA, SOUTH CAROLINA, AND TENNESSEE -- ARE EXPERIENCING AN INCREASE NOT ONLY IN THEIR GENERAL POPULATION, BUT IN THEIR VETERANS POPULATION AS WELL.

IN ALABAMA, THERE ARE SOME 437,000 VETERANS, PLUS THEIR DEPENDENTS AND SURVIVORS, AND THESE NUMBERS WILL ONLY INCREASE AS AMERICA'S OLDER VETERANS ARE RETIRING AND MOVING TO THE SUNBELT STATES. FOR EXAMPLE, VA STUDIES ESTIMATE THAT THE NUMBER OF WORLD WAR II VETERANS LIVING IN ALABAMA WILL DOUBLE BY 1990.

WHEN ONE ALSO TAKES INTO CONSIDERATION THE FACT THAT ALABAMA'S VETERANS HAVE NOT HAD ACCESS TO A NATIONAL CEMETERY FOR SEVERAL YEARS, SINCE THE CLOSING OF THE MOBILE CEMETERY, THE NEED FOR THE RAPID COMPLETION OF THE FORT MITCHELL NATIONAL CEMETERY IS CLEAR.

THE SITE THAT HAS BEEN SELECTED AND THE PLANNING THAT HAS BEEN DONE WILL PROVIDE A BEAUTIFUL RESTING PLACE FOR OUR VETERANS, TO WHOM WE ALL OWE A GREAT DEAL. IT IS MY UNDERSTANDING THAT THIS CEMETERY, WHEN OPENED, WILL CONTAIN APPROXIMATELY 10,000 GRAVE SITES, AND THAT WHEN ALL OF ITS ALMOST 300 ACRES OF LAND HAVE BEEN UTILIZED, THE BURIAL

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NEEDS OF VETERANS IN THE REGION WILL BE SATISFIED UNTIL WELL INTO THE NEXT CENTURY.

MR. CHAIRMAN, AGAIN I WOULD LIKE TO COMMEND YOU AND THE MEMBERS OF YOUR SUBCOMMITTEE, AS WELL AS ALL THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE ALABAMA DELEGATION, FOR YOUR INTEREST IN AND CONCERN FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS CEMETERY, AND I WOULD ALSO LIKE TO THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE THIS STATEMENT.

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DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
DEPARTMENT OF ALABAMA

STATEMENT OF
JAMES H. JACKSON, COMMANDER
DEPARTMENT OF ALABAMA
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
OF THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
OCTOBER 25, 1985

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

On behalf of the more than 13,900 members of the Disabled American Veterans, may I say that we are most appreciative of this opportunity to present our views on the plans to establish a VA national cemetery in Ft. Mitchell, Alabama.

Initially, Mr. Chairman, the Disabled American Veterans, Department of Alabama wishes to commend you for the leadership role you have played and the committment you have exhibited with respect to the VA's establishment of a national cemetery at Ft. Mitchell.

Your efforts have brought meaningful improvement to the emotional, as well as practical needs of veterans and their survivors with respect to the final resting place of those who have served in our nation's Armed Forces from the state of Alabama. For this, Mr. Chairman, the Disabled American Veterans in Alabama are most grateful.

As the Commander of the Disabled American Veterans, I wish to commend you and the members of this Subcommittee for their efforts in establishing

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the VA national cemetery in Ft. Mitchell. We all know that when Max Clelland was Administrator of the Veterans Affairs Ft. Gillom, Georgia had been selected as the next site for a national cemetery in the Southeastern part of the United States. We feel it was through you and the Subcommittee members' efforts that Ft. Mitchell was selected as the site of this much needed national cemetery.

As you know, the national cemetery in Mobile, Alabama is now closed and not excepting any remains for internment. We feel it is long overdue to establish an additional cemetery in the state of Alabama for the internment of those courageous veterans who defended this country when called upon in the nation's many wars. We feel it would now be an honor to those veterans to place their remains in a national cemetery here at Ft. Mitchell, Alabama. The $4 million dollar cost of the initial phase will also benefit the local economy.

It is our understanding that the VA has now completed the working plans for the new cemetery. Also, the bids will be let and the construction award will be made in November 1985. By November 1986, with the completion of the entrance, administration and service buildings remains of those wishing internment will also begin in November 1986.

As you are probably aware, it is the wish of the Disabled American Veterans to have a national cemetery in each state to honor those who served this country when called upon to defend her against all enemies. We feel the opening of this national cemetery at Ft. Mitchell is in line with our goals both here in Alabama and nationally.

This concludes my testimony, Mr. Chairman. Again, I wish to thank you and the Subcommittee for allowing us the opportunity to appear here today.

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DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

V. A. REGIONAL OFFICE
474 SOUTH COURT STREET
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 36104
PHONE 832-7044

STATEMENT OF
BILLY R. BLACK, SUPERVISOR
NATIONAL SERVICE OFFICER
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
OF THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
OCTOBER 25, 1985

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Initially, Mr. Chairman, we wish to recognize the leadership you have given as a member of Congress to award the establishment of a VA National Cemetery in Ft. Mitchell, Alabama. It has been through your leadership that the first phase of construction has been fully funded by the Congress which is unusual by today's standards.

We wish to thank you, also, for the leadership as a member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee for the passage of the VA Compensation and Health Care Act of 1985 which includes a 3.7% increase in VA compensation and DIC benefits and statutorily guarantees health care benefits for service connected disabled veterans.

The Balanced Budget Amendment which was recently passed in the Senate as the Gramm/Rudman/Hollings Amendment is now being considered in the House. This Balanced Budget Amendment that is being considered would further curtail the benefits and services

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of the Veterans Administration to service connected disabled veterans. We, in the Disabled American Veterans, feel that we are again be slighted by the so called balanced budget proposals. We, as disabled veterans, feel that everyone should be treated fairly and equally. We feel that the social security recipients who have just been granted a cost of living increase or COLA adjustment and DOD contractors who will not be affected by the budget cut proposals should get the same treatment as service connected disabled veterans who will be affected by the Balanced Budget Amendment.

We challenge you and the members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee to take an additional leadership role in the House to defend the veterans' programs and services that are in effect today and stop the balancing of the budget on the scarred backs of the disabled veterans who have given so much to defend this country during periods of war and peace.

Mr. Chairman, I wish to thank you for allowing me to present my comments before the Subcommittee Hearing here today.

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STATEMENT OF E. W. ROBINSON, STATE COMMANDER, THE AMERICAN LEGION
DEPARTMENT OF ALABAMA, BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
VETERANS AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
FIELD HEARING - RUSSELL COUNTY COURTHOUSE, PHENIX CITY, ALABAMA
OCTOBER 25, 1985

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

As the newly elected State Commander of The American Legion, Department of Alabama, it is an honor and a personal privilege for me to appear before this distinguished Committee today, to present the views of some 22,339 members of our great organization regarding the establishment of a Veterans National Cemetery in Ft. Mitchell, Alabama.

If I may, please allow me one moment, before giving my statement, to express on behalf of the 2,536,000 members of The American Legion throughout America, our sincere appreciation for the infallible support shown by the Congress in the welfare of the men and women of our Armed Forces who have defended the freedoms and principles of our great nation.

As you well know, Mr. Chairman, The American Legion believes, as a fundamental principle, that the duty to bear arms in the defense of America is a basic obligation of citizenship, and with this obligation there exists an equal commitment on the part of the nation not to forget those who have fulfilled their obligation in honorably serving our country during her time of need.

The American Legion is most grateful for the interest and concern of the U. S. Congress and we rely on you to preserve the programs and entitlements that have been genuinely earned by our veterans.

On behalf of The American Legion, Department of Alabama, I am most proud to express our sincere appreciation to the Veterans Administration for selecting Ft. Mitchell, Alabama, as the site of a National Cemetery for veterans. This cemetery will serve as the Regional National Cemetery for Standard Federal Region IV which includes, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. As you well know, Mr. Chairman, all other States except Alabama and Georgia in Region IV have two or more open National Cemeteries.

This site of 279 acres offers a most beautiful and serene environment of which the veterans so richly deserve as a final resting place.

Mr. Chairman, Alabama's veterans have not had access to a National Cemetery for

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several years in that the Mobile Cemetery has been closed for some time.

With the creation of this Cemetery, the 437,000 patriotic veterans of Alabama will have the rightful opportunity to be interred in a National Cemetery which is established in their honor.

I would like to commend you for your efforts in the establishment of this drastically needed National Cemetery plus your thoughtfulness in organizing this hearing to publicly announce the creation of this beautiful facility which I understand will be completed in early 1987. Allow me to further express my appreciation on behalf of The American Legion, to the entire Alabama Congressional delegation, especially the Honorable Bill Nichols, for their efforts in seeing this dream become a reality.

This completes my statement and again on behalf of The American Legion, Department of Alabama, we are extremely proud of the creation of this everlasting memorial for our deserving veterans. Thank you!

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STATE OF ALABAMA
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States
PHONE 263-5797 • 304 DEXTER AVENUE • P.O. BOX 4387 • MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 36101

October 16, 1985

STATEMENT OF

GORDON SHEWMAKE, VETERANS SERVICE OFFICER
DEPARTMENT OF ALABAMA
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE U.S.

BEFORE THE

VETERANS AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE ON

HOUSING AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

WITH RESPECT TO

STATUS OF THE VETERANS NATIONAL
CEMETERY IN FORT MITCHELL, ALABAMA

PHENIX CITY, ALABAMA OCTOBER 25, 1985

Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee, my name is Gordon Shewmake, and it is my privilege to serve the more than 27,370 men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Department of Alabama as Veterans Service Officer. As Veterans Service Officer I wish to express our appreciation for this opportunity to comment on the Veterans Cemetery to be located in Fort Mitchell, Alabama.

Mr. Chairman, I am sure you know that the Veterans Cemetery in Mobile, Al. is unable to care for our veterans who wish to be interned in a veterans cemetery due to the unavailability of space, therefore the V.F.W. along with our sister organizations have been in the forefront in trying to secure the veterans cemetery in Fort Mitchell, Alabama.

We were pleased when the site at Fort Mitchell was approved and are eagerly awaiting the time that this facility will become available for the burial of our vecerans who wish to be buried in a veteran cemetery.

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It is our understanding that 279 acres, 10 miles South of Phenix City, Alabama has been approved by the Veterans Administration for the cemetery with Phase I consisting of 61 acres targeted for completion in late April of 1987 with the dedication tentatively planned for May 1987, hopefully on Memorial Day.

We understand that Phase I will satisfy the needs of our veterans until at least 1995 with additional space opened as needed.

We further understand that the project has been funded in the amount $4,038,000.00 and that the plans are complete and the contacts are to be finalized in the near future.

For much too long, Alabama's veterans who wished to be buried in a veterans cemetery, a right granted by the Congress of the United States, have been denied that right due to unavailability of space within a reasonable distance of their homes. The completion of the Fort Mitchell site will again restore this right which is justly theirs.

The Fort Mitchell Cemetery is needed now. We hope that every means available will be utilized to see that the cemetery is completed on schedule with no delays. The Veterans of Foreign Wars are eagerly awaiting this accomplishment.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Committee on Veterans Affairs along with this Subcommittee for your outstanding support of our veterans needs and entitlements.

This completes our statement.

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